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General debate on national experience in population matters: adolescents and youth

Statement submitted by International Federation of University Women, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* E/CN.9/2012/2.

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Statement

The International Federation of University Women welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this important agenda item on adolescents and youth.

The organization focuses its activities on women and education. It therefore attaches particular importance to secondary education for adolescent girls. Education, in itself, is of fundamental importance to both development and poverty reduction. Girls who have attended secondary school, moreover, have more options as far as continuing on to higher education or to better employment opportunities. They are also better able to make decisions for their future lives. Poverty, on the other hand, puts girls at a distinct disadvantage, and those living in the poorest households are far less likely to complete secondary school than their wealthier peers. This in turn affects their ability to engage in gainful employment and to raise healthy and educated families.

Governments should therefore ensure that every child can enjoy her or his fundamental human right to education. The International Federation of University Women therefore urges Governments, both from developing countries and countries that provide development assistance, to ensure that policies and programmes are put in place and that the necessary financial resources are provided to ensure that girls not only go to primary school but also receive secondary and tertiary education, if so desired.

Lack of secondary education can affect the sexual and reproductive health of adolescent girls and young women. Girls not in formal education are more likely to have their first sexual experience and first child earlier, and may be forced into early marriage, or coerced into sex, frequently as a result of poverty. They are also more likely to leave school with little or no knowledge of sexuality, reproduction or HIV. As a result they are vulnerable to HIV infection, to fistula or to unsafe abortion, often with serious consequences. They also often lack access to contraception or other health services.

On the other hand, access to secondary education for girls usually delays their first sexual experience, the birth of the first child and results in fewer children, who in turn are often healthier and better educated.

Comprehensive sexuality education that includes human rights, HIV prevention, gender equality and sexuality and provides information on sexual violence, as well as communication and negotiation, is a crucial part of formal and informal education and should be an integral part of school curricula to enable children to become active, positive citizens in their communities and nations.

Access to comprehensive sexuality education is based on human rights that are included in universal instruments such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The International Federation of University Women therefore urges those Governments that do not already include comprehensive sexuality education in the curricula to introduce it as a matter of urgency so that all girls and boys are able to enjoy full access to secondary education that incorporates comprehensive sexuality education as part of its curricula. Such comprehensive sexuality education should begin in primary school

and continue through secondary school with measures taken to reach out-of-school adolescents and young people. It should be rights-based, age-appropriate and medically accurate.

The International Federation of University Women recognizes that information and education alone is not enough and that youth-friendly services must also be available, including access to contraception and emergency contraception free of charge.

If girls are in danger of possible sexual or other forms of violence on their way to and from school, they will be kept at home and consequently denied their right to education. Measures must therefore be taken to ensure that girls can go to and from school safely.